



Singapore

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2000](#)

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Singapore is a parliamentary republic in which politics is dominated overwhelmingly by the People's Action Party (PAP), which has held power uninterruptedly since Singapore gained autonomy from the United Kingdom in 1959. Opposition parties exist and regularly contest elections; however, the PAP holds 80 of 83 elected parliamentary seats (1 is vacant) and all ministerial positions. Elections take place at regular, constitutionally mandated intervals. The judiciary is efficient and constitutionally independent; however, there has been a perception that it reflects the views of the executive in politically sensitive cases as government leaders historically have utilized court proceedings, in particular defamation suits, against political opponents and critics.

The police are responsible for routine security within the country and for the protection of the borders, including action against illegal immigrants and patrolling the island's territorial waters. The military forces are responsible for external defense. The Internal Security Department (ISD) in the Ministry of Home Affairs is authorized by the Internal Security Act (ISA) to counter such perceived threats to the nation's security as espionage, international terrorism, threats to racial and religious harmony, and subversion. The Government's use of the ISA to control what it considers serious security threats has decreased. The civilian Government maintains tight control over all security activities. There were reports that members of the security forces occasionally committed human rights abuses.

Singapore has a free market economic system. Financial and business services industries, manufacturing of semiconductors and telecommunications equipment, and petroleum refining and petrochemical production are key sectors of the economy. The Government has liberalized broadly market access for telecommunications and financial services providers. Economic growth increased to an estimated 10.1 percent during the year, improving on the 5.6 percent registered in 1999. Per capita gross domestic product was estimated at \$23,383. Wealth is distributed broadly and the unemployment rate is low.

The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens; however, there were significant problems in some areas. The Government has wide powers to limit citizens' rights and to handicap political opposition. There were occasional instances of police abuse; however, the Government investigates and punishes those found guilty, and the media fully cover allegations of mistreatment. Caning, in addition to imprisonment, is a routine punishment for numerous offenses. The Government continues to rely on preventive detention to deal with espionage, organized crime, and narcotics. The authorities sometimes infringe on citizens' privacy rights.

The Government did not change the wide array of laws and government practices, or the informal methods of government influence, that continue to restrict freedom of speech and the press significantly and limit other civil and political rights. Government intimidation and pressure to conform result in the practice of self-censorship among journalists. Government leaders historically have utilized court proceedings, in particular defamation suits, against political opponents and critics. These suits, which consistently have been decided in favor of government plaintiffs, have chilled political speech and action, and created a perception that the ruling party uses the judicial system for political purposes. While no new defamation suits were filed during the year, some opposition leaders remain at risk of bankruptcy because of efforts by ruling party members to collect damages awarded in previous years. In June an opposition party leader lost a legal appeal to forestall payment of damages stemming from a 1998 defamation lawsuit filed against him by PAP members. There was a moderate level of ongoing debate in newspapers and Internet chat groups on various public issues, and the Government established a Speakers' Corner in a public park to facilitate the ability of persons to speak in public on a range of issues. However, government restrictions on such persons still inhibited their ability to speak freely. The Government significantly restricts freedom of assembly and association. Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church are banned; however, freedom of religion otherwise generally is

respected. There is some legal discrimination against women, which affects benefits for children and husbands in limited cases. The Government has moved actively to counter societal discrimination against women and minorities, but violence and some discrimination against women and reports of trafficking in persons for the purpose of prostitution persist. Foreign workers are vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There were no reports of political or other extrajudicial killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits torture; however, there were occasional instances of police mistreatment of detainees, and there were a few reports of police abuse during the year. The media report fully on allegations of police abuse of those arrested, and the Government takes action against abusers. The press reported that approximately 10 law enforcement officers were jailed for using excessive force on prisoners and suspects since 1995. In March a court disallowed the confession of a youth who had alleged that police beat him to force his confession to the sale of pirated video disks after a January 1999 arrest. The court ruled that it could not be certain that the admission was made voluntarily. In 1999 56 complaints of police abuse of detainees were filed, of which 7 were substantiated.

The Penal Code mandates caning, in addition to imprisonment, as punishment for some 30 offenses involving the use of violence or threat of violence against a person, such as rape and robbery, and also for such nonviolent offenses as vandalism, drug trafficking, and violation of immigration laws. Caning is discretionary for convictions on other charges involving the use of criminal force, such as kidnaping, or voluntarily causing grievous hurt. Women, men over age 50 or under age 16, and those determined unfit by a medical officer are exempted from punishment by caning. Although current statistics are not available, caning is a commonly administered punishment within the stipulations of the law. Prison conditions generally are good and meet minimum international standards.

The Government does not allow human rights monitors to visit prisons.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The law provides that, in most instances, arrests are to be carried out following the issuance of an authorized warrant; however, some laws provide for arrests without warrants. Those arrested must be charged before a magistrate within 48 hours. The great majority of those arrested are charged expeditiously and brought to trial. Those who face criminal charges are allowed counsel, and the Law Society of Singapore administers a criminal legal aid plan for those who cannot afford to hire an attorney. A functioning system of bail exists for persons who are charged. In death penalty cases, the Supreme Court appoints two attorneys for defendants who are unable to afford their own counsel.

Some laws—the Internal Security Act (ISA), the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act (CLA), the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA), and the Undesirable Publications Act (UPA)—have provisions for arrest without warrant. The ISA historically is employed primarily against suspected Communist-related security threats. The CLA historically has been employed primarily against suspected organized crime (i.e., mainly secret society activities), and drug trafficking; however, it also has been used against suspected espionage activities. Opposition politicians have called for the abolition of the ISA, but the Government has rejected these calls, claiming that citizens accept the act as an element of the nation's security.

The ISA and the CLA permit preventive detention without trial for the protection of public security or safety or the maintenance of public order. The ISA gives broad discretion to the Minister for Home Affairs to order detention without charges at the direction of the President, if the latter determines that a person poses a threat to national security. The initial detention may be for up to 2 years and may be renewed without limitation for additional periods up to 2 years at a time. Detainees have a right to be informed of the grounds for their

detention and are entitled to counsel. However, they have no right to challenge the substantive basis for their detention through the courts. The ISA specifically excludes recourse to the normal judicial system for review of a detention order made under its authority. Instead detainees may make representations to an advisory board, headed by a Supreme Court justice, which reviews each detainee's case periodically and must make a recommendation to the President within 3 months of the initial detention. The President may concur with the advisory board's recommendation that a detainee be released prior to the expiration of the detention order but is not obligated to do so.

No one was detained under the ISA from 1989 through 1996. Two persons were detained in 1997, and four in 1998, all for alleged espionage. As of August, only one of these persons remained in detention; four had been released by the end of 1998. There were no reports of any new detentions under the ISA during the year.

The CLA comes up for renewal every 5 years; it was strengthened and extended for another 5 years in April 1999. Under its provisions, the Minister for Home Affairs may order preventive detention, with the concurrence of the Public Prosecutor, for an initial period of 1 year, and the President may extend detention for additional periods up to 1 year at a time. The Minister must provide a written statement of the grounds for detention to the Criminal Law Advisory Committee (CLAC) within 28 days of making the order. The CLAC then reviews the case at a private hearing. CLAC rules require detainees to be notified of the grounds of their detention at least 10 days prior to the hearing. The detainee may represent himself or be represented by a lawyer. After the hearing, the Committee makes a written recommendation to the President, who may cancel, confirm, or amend the detention order. However, persons detained under the CLA may have recourse to the courts via an application of a writ of habeas corpus. Persons detained without trial under the CLA are entitled to counsel but only may challenge the substantive basis for their detention to the CLAC. The CLA is used almost exclusively in cases involving narcotics and secret criminal societies and has not been used for political purposes. According to official figures, less than 400 persons were detained under the provisions of the CLA through June, a decrease from the 450 persons detained at the end of 1998.

Persons who allege mistreatment under detention may bring criminal charges against government officials who are alleged to have committed such acts; there were no reports during the year that persons were discouraged from making such accusations by fear of official retaliation (see Section 1.e.).

Both the ISA and the CLA contain provisions that allow for such modified forms of detention as curfews, residence limitations, requirements to report regularly to the authorities, limitations on travel, or, in the case of the ISA, restrictions on political activities and association.

The MDA permits detention without trial. Under the MDA, the director of the CNB also may commit--without trial--suspected drug abusers to a drug rehabilitation center for up to 3 years. At the end of 1998, almost 5,000 persons were detained under the provisions of the MDA for treatment and rehabilitation. Under the Intoxicating Substances Act, the CNB director may order the treatment for rehabilitation of a person believed to be an inhalant drug abuser for up to 6 months.

The Constitution prohibits exile, and the Government respects the prohibition in practice.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the Government generally respects this provision; however, laws that limit judicial review allow for some restrictions in practice. Some judicial officials, especially Supreme Court judges, have ties to the ruling party and its leaders. However, these ties generally do not appear to influence the judiciary's independence. The President appoints judges to the Supreme Court on the recommendation of the Prime Minister in consultation with the Chief Justice. The President also appoints subordinate court judges on the recommendation of the Chief Justice. The term of appointment is determined by the Legal Service Commission, of which the Chief Justice is the chairman. The 1989 constitutional amendments that eliminated judicial review of the objective grounds for detention under the ISA and subversion laws allow the Government to restrict, or even eliminate, judicial review in such cases and thereby restrict, on vaguely defined national security grounds, the scope of certain fundamental liberties provided for in the Constitution. Under the ISA and the CLA, the President and the Minister of Home Affairs have substantial de facto judicial power, which explicitly (in the case of the ISA) or implicitly (in the case of the CLA) excludes normal judicial review.

Government leaders historically have used court proceedings, in particular defamation suits, against political opponents and critics (see Sections 2.a. and 3.). Both this practice and consistent awards in favor of government plaintiffs have raised questions about the relationship between the Government and the judiciary and led to a perception that the judiciary reflects the views of the executive in politically sensitive cases. Two cases from the most recent elections--defamation actions against Workers' Party (WP) politicians Tang Liang

Hong and J.B. Jeyaretnam for statements they made during the campaign (see Sections 2.a. and 3)--perpetuated the perception of undue judicial sympathy for government plaintiffs.

The judicial system has two levels of courts: The Supreme Court, which includes the High Court and the Court of Appeal; and the subordinate courts. Subordinate court judges and magistrates, as well as public prosecutors, are civil servants whose specific assignments are determined by the Legal Service Commission, which can decide on job transfers to any of several legal service departments. The subordinate courts handle the great majority of civil and criminal cases in the first instance. The High Court may hear any civil or criminal case, although it generally limits itself to civil matters involving substantial claims and criminal matters carrying the death penalty or imprisonment of more than 10 years. The Court of Appeal is the highest and final court of review for matters decided in the subordinate courts or the High Court. In addition the law provides for Islamic courts whose authority is limited to Islamic family law.

If they wish, Supreme Court Justices may remain in office until the mandatory retirement age of 65, after which they may continue to serve at the Government's discretion for brief, renewable terms at full salary. The Constitution has a provision for the Prime Minister or the Chief Justice to convene a tribunal in order to remove a justice "on the ground of misbehavior or inability...to properly discharge the functions" of office, but it has never been used.

The judicial system provides citizens with an efficient judicial process. In normal cases, the Criminal Procedures Code provides that a charge against a defendant must be read and explained to him as soon as it is framed by the prosecution or the magistrate. Defendants enjoy a presumption of innocence and the right of appeal, in most cases. They have the right to be present at their trials, to be represented by an attorney, to confront witnesses against them, to provide witnesses and evidence on their own behalf, and to review government-held evidence relevant to their cases. Trials are public and by judge. There are no jury trials.

The Constitution extends these rights to all citizens. However, persons detained under the ISA or CLA are not entitled to a public trial. In addition proceedings of the advisory board under the ISA and CLA are not public (see Section 1.d.).

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The Government generally respects the privacy of homes and families; however, it has a pervasive influence over civic and economic life and sometimes uses its wide discretionary powers to infringe on these rights. Normally, the police must have a warrant issued by a magistrate's court to conduct a search. However, they may search a person, home, or property without a warrant if they decide that such a search is necessary to preserve evidence. The Government has wide discretionary powers under the ISA, CLA, MDA, and UPA to conduct searches without a warrant if it determines that national security, public safety or order, or the public interest are at issue. Defendants may request judicial review of such searches.

Divisions of the Government's law enforcement agencies, including the Internal Security Department and the Corrupt Practices Investigation Board, have wide networks for gathering information and highly sophisticated capabilities to monitor telephone and other private conversations and conduct surveillance. It is believed that the authorities routinely monitor telephone conversations and use of the Internet; however, there were no confirmed reports of such practices during the year. The law permits government monitoring of Internet use. In April 1999, the Ministry of Home Affairs probed the computers of 200,000 customers of an Internet service provider (ISP) for evidence of a computer virus infection. After a public controversy, the Ministry announced in May 1999 that it would reject future requests to conduct such probes, and the National Information Technology Committee within the Ministry of Home Affairs developed guidelines for ISP conduct later that year. It is widely believed that the authorities routinely conducted surveillance on some opposition politicians and other government critics; however, no such reports were substantiated during the year.

The Government is active in some areas normally considered private, in pursuit of what it considers the public interest. For example the Government continues to enforce ethnic ratios for publicly subsidized housing, where the majority of citizens live and own their own units, designed to achieve an ethnic mix more or less in proportion to that in the society at large.

The Government does not permit the import of newspapers from Malaysia and bans or restricts the import of other publications (see Section 2.a.). However, it does not block Internet access to these publications.

Malaysian and Indonesian television and radio programming may be received, but satellite dishes are banned,

with few exceptions. The Government stated that it would review the restriction on satellite dishes in 2002 (see Section 2.a.).

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and expression but permits official restrictions on these rights, and in practice the Government significantly restricts freedom of speech and of the press. The Government's authoritarian style has fostered an atmosphere inimical to fully free speech and the press. Government intimidation and pressure to conform result in the practice of self-censorship among journalists; however, there was some limited progress towards greater openness during the year, including a moderate level of ongoing debate in newspapers and Internet chat groups on various public issues.

Under the ISA, the Government may restrict or to place conditions on publications that incite violence, that counsel disobedience to the law, that might arouse tensions among the various segments of the population (races, religions, and language groups), or that might threaten national interests, national security, or public order. While the ISA rarely has been invoked recently, political opposition and criticism remain restricted by the Government's power to define these restrictive powers broadly. Occasional government references during controversies to speech that it considers "out-of-bounds" are understood to be implicit threats to invoke the ISA; however, these limits are not codified, and journalists and others generally believe that these limitations have shifted toward greater tolerance in recent years.

Government leaders often have challenged publicly the legitimacy of political speech articulated outside what they call the "Western model" of journalism, in which the Government claims that the media report news from their perspective, rather than to act responsibly, which generally is understood to mean to support the goals of the elected leadership and preserve social and religious harmony. In addition strict defamation and press laws and the Government's demonstrated willingness to defend vigorously against what it considers personal attacks of officials, have led journalists sometimes to refrain from publishing items about issues such as alleged government corruption, nepotism, or a compliant judiciary.

The Government strongly influences both the print and the electronic media. Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. (SPH), a private holding company with close ties to the Government, owns all general circulation newspapers in the four official languages--English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. The Government must approve, and can remove, the holders of SPH management shares, who have the power to appoint or dismiss all directors or staff. The Government also may remove citizens as stockholders. As a result, while newspapers print a large and diverse selection of articles from domestic and foreign sources, their editorials, coverage of domestic events, and coverage of sensitive foreign relations issues closely reflect government policies and the opinions of government leaders.

However, columnists' opinions, editorials, and letters to the editor express a range of opinions on public issues. For example, there was an active and often critical public debate in the print media over the Government's decision in late June to link the salaries of government ministers to top private sector salaries. The importation of some publications is barred, although a wide range of international magazines and newspapers may be purchased uncensored; however, newspapers printed in Malaysia may not be imported (see Section 1.f.).

Government leaders from time to time have used defamation lawsuits or the threat of such actions to discourage public criticism and intimidate opposition politicians and the press. There were no new defamation cases filed by ruling party figures during the year. Nevertheless, the unbroken success of government leaders' suits has fostered caution about political speech among the public and a culture of self-censorship within the news media, and has demonstrated the danger of engaging in opposition politics. At year's end, Workers' Party (WP) secretary general J.B. Jeyaretnam, a nominated M.P., remained in danger of bankruptcy due to failure to pay damages ordered against him in several individual law suits. A declaration of bankruptcy would result in the forfeiture of his parliamentary seat. The Prime Minister and foreign minister did not pursue collection of the judgments against Jeyaretnam during the year. However, the WP leader was declared bankrupt briefly in May until he made a payment to two plaintiffs; in June he lost his legal appeals to forestall payment to eight other plaintiffs. Both cases stemmed from an article in a WP publication that criticized the organizers of Tamil Week, an event that promoted the use of the Tamil language. In 1998 a court ruled that Jeyaretnam is responsible as the editor of the publication.

In November Parliament amended the Public Entertainment Act. The revisions included changing the act's title to the Public Entertainment and Meetings Act (PEMA). Both before and after these revisions, a permit is required under the law for virtually any form of public speech or entertainment. After the revisions, permits no

longer are required to hold a garden party. In September police denied a permit to an opposition MP to speak at a dinner that his party organized. The 1999 convictions of Chee Soon Juan, Secretary-General of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party, for giving two public speeches without a permit sparked widespread discussion in the press by the public and officials regarding the possibility for relaxing these restrictions. Chee had asserted that he had no alternative but to violate the act, since his earlier applications under the PEA either were refused or approved so late that the event had to be canceled.

Members of an independent political discussion group proposed in a newspaper article the creation of free speech areas patterned after the "Speakers' Corner" found in Hyde Park, in London, England. After first refusing to consider this suggestion, the Government later decided to institute a Speakers' Corner; however, government restrictions on speakers still limited their abilities to speak freely. Prospective speakers, who must be citizens, must show their identification cards and register in advance with police, but need not obtain a public entertainment license (see Section 2.b.). Speakers must register their intention to speak 30 days in advance. A list of registered speakers is posted on a notice board outside the police station. While speech topics are not required to be declared in advance, the government regulations governing the Speakers' Corner state that, "the speech should not be religious in nature and should not have the potential to cause feelings of enmity, ill will, or hostility between different racial or religious groups." A variety of persons, including politicians, social activists, and ordinary citizens, availed themselves of Speakers' Corner during the year.

The government-linked holding company, Singapore International Media Pte Ltd., has a near monopoly on radio and television broadcasting. Subsidiaries operate all 4 broadcast television channels and 10 of the 15 domestic radio stations. Of the five remaining radio stations, four are owned by organizations with close government affiliation—two by the Singapore Armed Forces Reservists' Association (SAFRA) and two by the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC). Only one, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service, is completely independent of the Government. Some Malaysian and Indonesian television and radio programming can be received, but satellite dishes are banned, with few exceptions (see Section 1.f.).

An increasing number of foreign media operations are located within the country. A 1990 law requires foreign publications that report on politics and current events in Southeast Asia to register and post a \$141,000 (SD234,000) bond and name a person in the country to accept legal service. These requirements strengthen the Government's control over foreign media. Under amendments to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, the Government may limit the circulation of foreign publications that it determines interfere in domestic politics. Also, in 1999 the Government announced that foreign electronic media must meet the same reporting standards as foreign print media. However, this requirement has not been enforced. The weekly circulation of the Asian Wall Street Journal (AWSJ), Asiaweek, and the Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER), all foreign publications, is limited (or "gazetted"). The fact that the Government gradually has raised the allowed weekly circulation of the FEER and Asiaweek corresponding more or less to actual demand allows the Government to maintain this aspect of control over the press while still maintaining the appearance of flexibility. The Government may ban the circulation of domestic and foreign publications under provisions of the ISA and the UPA (see Section 1.f.).

The authorities censor movies, television programs, video materials, computer games, and music. The Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA), established in 1994 to regulate and promote the broadcasting industry, develops censorship standards with the help of a citizen advisory panel. The ISA, the UPA, and the Films Act allow the ban, seizure, censorship, or restriction of written, visual, or musical materials if the SBA determines that they threaten the stability of the State, are pro-Communist, contravene moral norms, are pornographic, show excessive or gratuitous sex and violence, glamorize or promote drug use, or incite racial, religious, or linguistic animosities. Polls indicate that there is strong public support for continued censorship of sex and violence in films. There is a list of banned films, which is not made public. Certain films that might be barred from general release may be allowed limited showings, either censored or uncensored, with a special rating.

The UPA was amended in 1998 to include compact discs, sound recordings, pictures, and computer-generated drawings, and to raise the fine for distribution or possession of banned publications. The list of banned English-language publications consists primarily of sexually oriented materials, but also includes some religious and political publications. The Films Act was amended in 1998 to ban political advertising using films or videos. The Government justified the ban as protecting politics from sensationalism, innuendo, and inaccuracy, but one effect was to restrict further an already limited range of what was deemed acceptable political discourse (see Section 3). Opposition politician Chee Soon Juan alleged in 1999 that prominent bookstores, pressured by the Government, refused to carry copies of a book he authored. He also alleged that, after his book was printed in Malaysia, the Government would not allow its import.

Since 1996 the SBA has regulated access to material on the Internet, using a framework of web site licenses to encourage accountability and responsible use of the Internet. It also regulates Internet material by licensing Internet service providers who install "proxy servers" through which local users must route their Internet

connections. Such services act as a filter for content that the Government considers objectionable and can block access to certain sites. While the Government does not consider regulation of the Internet to be censorship, the SBA directs service providers to block access to web pages that, in the Government's view, undermine public security, national defense, racial and religious harmony, and public morals. The SBA in 1996 ordered Internet service providers to block access to some sites, most or all of which the Government believed are pornographic; however, the list of blocked sites is difficult to verify since it is not a matter of public record. In 1997 the SBA announced a new Internet Code of Practice to further clarify what types of material were forbidden and specify the responsibilities of Internet providers. The SBA stated that it had no intention of monitoring Internet or electronic mail use but intended to block access to material that contained pornography or excessive violence or that incited racial or religious hatred (see Section 1.f.).

All public institutions of higher education and political research institutions are linked closely to the Government. Although faculty members technically are not government employees, in practice they are subject to potential government influence. Academics speak and publish widely, and engage in debate on social and political issues. However, they are aware that public comments outside the classroom or academic publications that venture into the prohibited areas--criticism of political leaders or sensitive social and economic policies, or comments that might disturb ethnic or religious harmony or that appear to advocate partisan political views--could subject them to sanctions. Publications by local academics and members of research institutions rarely deviate substantially from government views.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution grants citizens the right of peaceful assembly but permits Parliament to impose restrictions "as it considers necessary or expedient" in the interest of security, and the Government restricts this right in practice. Assemblies of more than five persons in public, including political meetings and rallies, must have police permission. Spontaneous public gatherings or demonstrations virtually are unknown. The Government closely monitors political gatherings regardless of the number of persons present. Persons who wish to speak at a public function, excluding functions provided by or under the auspices of the Government, must obtain a public entertainment license from the police. Opposition politicians routinely experienced delays before being notified of the decision on their applications, although the Government claims that the delays come only when the applications were submitted late (see Section 2.a.). In May authorities denied approval for a forum on gays and lesbians, citing the illegality of homosexual acts. On December 31, police arrested and later charged 15 Falun Gong adherents for conducting protest without a permit; only 2 of those arrested were Singapore citizens. The 15 persons arrested had participated in an assembly of 60 Falun Gong members who sought to draw attention to the arrest and killing of Falun Gong members in China. The group had not sought a permit, asserting that police had not responded to their previous efforts to obtain permits.

The Constitution provides for freedom of association but permits Parliament to impose restrictions that "it considers necessary or expedient" in the interest of security, and the Government restricts this right in practice. Most associations, societies, clubs, religious groups, and other organizations with more than 10 members must be registered with the Government under the Societies Act. The Government denies registration to groups that it believes are likely to have been formed to assemble for unlawful purposes or for purposes prejudicial to public peace, welfare, or public order (see Section 2.c.). The Government has absolute discretion in applying this broad, vague language to register or dissolve societies. The Government prohibits organized political activities except by organizations registered as political parties. This prohibition limits opposition activities, and, along with other factors, contributes to restrict the scope of unofficial political expression and action (see Section 3). The prohibition affects the PAP less because of its long domination of the Government and its overwhelming parliamentary majority; the PAP is able to use nonpolitical organizations such as residential committees and neighborhood groups for political purposes far more extensively than can opposition political parties.

There are few nongovernmental organizations (NGO's), apart from ostensibly nonpolitical organizations such as religious groups, ethnically-affiliated organizations, and providers of welfare services. The dominant role of the Government in almost every facet of life and the limiting effect of the law on the formation of publicly active organizations are, in large part, responsible for this situation. However, during 1999 a group of NGO's formed what they called "the Working Committee" as an umbrella group through which various NGO's could exchange information and cooperate to promote the development of civil society.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the Government bans some religious groups. The Constitution provides that every citizen or person in the country has a constitutional right to profess, practice, or propagate his religious belief so long as such activities do not breach any other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality.

There is no state religion. However, all religious groups are subject to government scrutiny and must be registered legally under the Societies Act. The 1990 Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), which was prompted by actions that the Government perceived as threats to religious harmony, including aggressive and "insensitive" proselytizing and the "mixing of religion and politics," made illegal what the Government deems to be the inappropriate involvement of religious groups and officials in political affairs. It gave the Government the power to restrict officials and members of religious groups and institutions from carrying out political activities, criticizing the Government, creating "ill-will" between religious groups or carrying out subversive activities. The act also prohibits judicial review of its enforcement or of any possible denial of rights arising from it.

The Government plays an active, but limited, role in religious affairs. It does not tolerate speech or actions, including ostensibly religious speech or actions, that affect racial and religious harmony, and sometimes issues restraining orders barring persons from taking part in such activities. The Presidential Council for Religious Harmony must review such orders, and make recommendations to the President on whether to confirm, cancel, or alter a restraining order. The Presidential Council also examines all pending legislation to ensure that it is not disadvantageous to a particular group, reports to the Government on matters that affect any racial or religious community, and investigates complaints. The Government also attempts to ensure that citizens have ready access to religious organizations that are associated traditionally with their ethnic groups by assisting religious institutions to find space in publicly subsidized housing, in which the great majority of citizens live. The Government maintains a semiofficial relationship with the Muslim community through the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), which was established under the Administration of Muslim Law Act. The MUIS advises the Government on the Muslim community's concerns and has some regulatory authority over Muslim religious matters. The Government facilitates financial assistance to build and maintain mosques.

Under the Societies Act, the Government has banned meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church. The Government deregistered and banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 1972 on the grounds that its roughly 2,000 members refuse to perform military service (which is obligatory for all male citizens), salute the flag, or swear oaths of allegiance to the State. The Government regards such refusal as prejudicial to public welfare and order. While the Government has not outlawed the profession or propagation of the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses and does not arrest members merely for being believers, the result of deregistration has been to make meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses illegal. The Government also has banned all written materials published by the Jehovah's Witnesses' publishing affiliates, the International Bible Students Association and the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. In practice this has led to the confiscation of Bibles published by the group, even though publishing Bibles has not been outlawed.

The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, also known as the Unification Church, was dissolved in 1982 by the Minister for Home Affairs. Missionaries, with the exception of members of Jehovah's Witnesses and representatives of the Unification Church, are permitted to work and to publish and distribute religious texts. However, while the Government does not prohibit evangelical activities in practice, it discourages activities that might upset the balance of intercommunal relations.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Constitution grants citizens the right to move freely throughout the country; however, while the Government generally respects this right in practice, it